

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,
BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
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REMINISCENCES
OF THE
SIGNAL SERVICE
IN THE
CIVIL WAR.

BY
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REMINISCENCES OF THE SIGNAL SERVICE IN THE CIVIL WAR.

[READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY JANUARY 17, 1899.]

THE momentous and exciting incidents which have been so rapidly transpiring during the past few months in which the army and navy of this Republic have taken so prominent a part, and have achieved such wonderful renown, have for the moment engrossed the attention of the public to such a degree, that except in the minds of the older generation, or among the veterans of the army and navy, the subject of the Civil War has been cast in the shade, and reminiscences connected with its tragic history have become stale and unprofitable.

Your president has, however, assumed the grave responsibility of inviting me to present a paper before you this evening relating to events connected with my

personal experiences in the signal service of the army, during that great crisis in the nation's history, but I realize that what may seem of more than passing importance to myself as an actor in that great struggle for the supremacy of the flag, and the permanency of the Union, may to others possess very little interest. I shall, therefore, at the outset of my remarks entreat your kind indulgence and forbearance for what may appear but the rehearsal of dry historical events.

Before touching upon the signal service, with your permission, I desire to relate an incident connected with my early association with army life. In January, 1861, I was in Massachusetts, my native State, having recently returned from San Francisco on a visit to relatives in the East. Believing that war was inevitable and liable to occur at any moment; that the South, smarting under its defeat by the election of Lincoln as President, was preparing to attempt the dissolution of the union of the States by open and armed rebellion against the authority of the government, and by bloodshed if necessary, to enforce its demands, and, if successful, to establish an independ-

ent and separate republic for the maintenance of slavery, and the principles of State sovereignty for which it had so stoutly and persistently contended ; and believing that the government in her unprepared condition for defence against its enemies would need the aid of all her loyal sons, I determined to commence the formation of a company of men to be prepared at any hour or moment to respond to the country's call upon her loyal sons for her defence. Accordingly, I gathered together a goodly number of the young men of the town and stated my views of the situation, and finally invited them to join with me in the formation of a company to be prepared for any emergency which might arise. Seventeen men responded to this invitation and their names were signed to the following pledge :

“ We, the undersigned, believing that the government is about to be assailed by the hands of traitorous foes, hereby pledge ourselves, our lives and sacred honor in her defence, and will at once respond to any call to arms made by the President of the United States, or others in authority, for the support and protection of the Union and the defence of the Flag.”

This little band of minute men were drilled in marching and the manual of arms, using axe handles for muskets, in a country store in the evenings after closing time, during that winter of intense excitement and feverish expectancy preceding the actual commencement of the war. Thirteen of these men afterward became members of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers, afterward known as the "Fighting Fifteenth," and went into the war. A majority of them laid down their lives upon the battlefield or in consequence of wounds received in their country's service. Those who had signed the above pledge who did not enter the service were prevented from so doing by physical disability. I mention this incident as I believe this band of patriots to have been the first volunteers to enroll themselves for their country's defence, from the New England States in 1861. The writer enlisted as a private soldier in the company which was recruited by him to its maximum number in April and May, 1861, and many who applied were turned away. It went into camp at Worcester as a part of the Fifteenth Massachusetts Volunteers, June 28, 1861, was mustered into the

United States service July 12th, and was commanded by Col. Charles Devens. It achieved a record for bravery and heroism second to none in the war. The writer was commissioned by Governor Andrew a first lieutenant previous to leaving Worcester for the seat of war. The regiment left camp at Worcester Aug. 8, 1861. It received its first baptism of blood at Ball's Bluff, Va., October 21st, where it was defeated with the terrible loss in killed, wounded, and prisoners of nearly one-half of those engaged in the action. During the three years in which the regiment was in the field, it was engaged in all the principal battles which took place under McClellan, Burnside, Meade, and Grant. Its total losses in killed, wounded, and missing in its numerous battles and skirmishes were 911 men out of a total enlistment of 1,701 men.

At the battle of Antietam, the regiment sustained one of the most remarkable losses of the war. It went into action with 606 officers and men, of whom 318 were killed, wounded, or missing — more than one-half of those brave boys wiped out in that awful conflict.

At the battle of the Wilderness, it went into action

with 275 men, and in that battle, and at Petersburg, its losses were 143 men. Again at Gettysburg, its losses were nearly fifty per cent. of the number engaged. The regiment well earned its title of the "Fighting Fifteenth." It was engaged in twenty-two important battles, a record hardly surpassed and rarely equaled by any body of troops during the war.

Fortunately, perhaps, for myself, while my regiment was lying at Poolesville, Md., a few weeks preceding the battle of Ball's Bluff, I was ordered to report to the chief signal officer of the army at Washington for instruction in signal duty. It was understood by Colonel Devens and by myself that I was to be detached from the regiment only until I had become familiar with the signal service. This proved to be an error, and from the date of my departure until long after the close of the war, I saw neither the regiment nor any of its members again.

Upon reporting to the chief signal officer, Major Myer, I was at once initiated into the weird mysteries of aerial signals with wands or motions of any kind, with flags by day and torches by night, and very soon became efficient in its work. Here let me

turn back the search-lights of memory upon a page of history, revealing the discovery and inception of the system of army signals.

For the first time, so far as known in the world's history in actual war, and upon the battlefield, a system of aerial signals was employed by the armies engaged in the great struggle between the North and the South from 1861 to 1865. This system was the invention of an assistant surgeon of the United States Army, Lieut. Albert J. Myer, and had been the subject of experiment for some years prior to the war, both upon the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Its practical utility had been in these experiments so fully demonstrated, that upon the opening of hostilities the system was adopted by the War Department, and Lieutenant Myer was appointed its chief, with the rank of major, with authority to have commissioned officers and enlisted men detailed from the regular and volunteer service for instruction in signal duty. Accordingly, on the 10th of June, 1861, Major Myer proceeded from Washington to Fortress Munroe, and reported to Maj.-Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, commanding the Department of Virginia, and, on June 12,

1861, ten officers and thirty enlisted men were detached from regiments serving in that department, and directed to report to the chief signal officer of the army for special duty in the Signal Corps. This was the inception of the signal service in the United States Army, and the first detail of officers and soldiers for this new military corps of the service which was destined to become of such incalculable aid in the movements and direction of troops and artillery when under fire upon the battlefield, and to revolutionize and take the place of other cumbersome, imperfect, and dangerous methods of communication under similar circumstances.

It may not be uninteresting to know in what manner the suggestion was first brought to the mind of this young officer of inventing this method for transmitting and receiving messages. While stationed in New Mexico in 1856, being out upon a scouting expedition with a detachment of cavalry, he observed a body of Indians of the Comanche tribe in an elevated position some distance from his point of concealment, making peculiar motions in the air with their lances, which seemed to meet with intelligent

response from another group upon an eminence some miles away. He closely observed these motions, which described certain spherical movements with definite intervals, until he became satisfied that the method of sign language was a system mutually and perfectly understood, and the thought was at once suggested to him of devising a code and using it in the army. Acting upon the idea thus presented, he immediately began a series of experiments, and in a few weeks had systematized the code of signals which has since been in use in the army. He patented the invention, and soon after the breaking out of the Rebellion, made the patent over to the United States Government without any remuneration whatever.

I quote from the preface of the History of the Signal Corps, recently published: "The genesis of military signalling is written in the labors of Myer. What from the most ancient times other commanders had dimly comprehended, Napoleon first saw clearly enough to crystalize into his maxim, 'The secret of successful warfare is the secret of accurate and rapid communication.' What the great captain of modern warfare recognized, but could not attain, was the

problem whose solution fell to Albert James Myer of the Medical Department United States Army. In all campaigns from the remotest times, the maintenance of communication by transient signals had presented itself to commanders as of paramount importance, but in practice it had eluded them. The flashing shield at Suninam and the fingers of Chappe's semaphore were alike in their unavailability upon the field of battle. The waving flag and torch of Myer were the first contribution to the solution of the problem, which were efficient without cumbersome machinery, and while so simple as to be easily extemporized from any chance material, were yet capable of performing every service which they could be called upon to render."

The officers and men who had reported to Major Myer at Fortress Monroe were rapidly instructed in the code of signals and its method of practical use by day and night in the transmission and receiving messages of any character or length, by the waving of flags by day and torches at night. Jointed staffs were made for both flags and torches to be used for varying distances. Flags were also of dimensions of

from two to six feet square, to be used for either short or long distances. For distances of from one to five miles, a pole six feet long and a flag two feet square were generally used, and for greater distances up to thirty or forty miles, the pole would be eight, ten, twelve, or sixteen feet in length, and the flag four or six feet square. All the flags used had a square in the centre of a different color from the margin, as a flag with white margin with red or black centre, or the reverse, so that it could be more readily distinguished and less liable to be mistaken for some other flag.

The first service performed by this initial signal party was in its character experimental, although in the field and in the presence of the enemy. A signal station was established at Fort Wool, located on the Rip Raps in Hampton Roads, and efforts were made to secure an accurate and effective range on the rebel batteries at Sewall's Point. In order to accomplish this it became necessary for an officer to be stationed at a point where the effect of every shot could be observed accurately and recorded. Major Myer and other officers were furnished with a tug and

steamed out to a position of observation covering both the Union and rebel works. From that point the firing was directed and the exact range was obtained by signals from the tug to the Union fort.

The phenomenal success which marked these tests of the practical use of this new method of signals, gave fresh impetus to its employment in every department of the military service, and the chief of the corps at once made vigorous efforts to increase its efficiency by causing the detail from the volunteer forces in the field, of many active, intelligent, and educated young officers, and establishing a camp of instruction at Georgetown Heights near Washington, D. C. The officers and men gathered here in July, August, and September, 1861, were speedily and thoroughly drilled in the principles and field work of signals, and on October 9th the first regular detail for the field was made by the following order :

SPECIAL ORDER, No. 9.

First Lieutenants Theodore S. Dumont, Edward J. Keenan, Henry S. Tafft, and Wm. S. Coggs; and Second Lieutenants Franklin E. Town, H. Clay Snyder, and Ocran H. Howard, act-

ing Signal Officers, will proceed without delay to Annapolis, Md., and report for duty to Brig.-Gen. Thomas W. Sherman.

By order of

ALBERT J. MYER,

Chief Signal Officer.

It was my fortune to be selected to accompany this first detail to join the expeditionary corps then preparing for a descent upon the South Atlantic coast, and reporting in compliance with the above order, was assigned to duty as signal officer upon the staff of General Sherman with two other officers of the Signal Corps.

After several days delay at Annapolis, the transport flotilla sailed down Chesapeake Bay for the rendezvous with the naval fleet which had in the meantime been assembled at Fortress Monroe. This great fleet was under the command of that noble and brave old commodore, S. F. Dupont, afterward rear admiral United States Navy.

On the 29th of October the entire squadron of war ships conveying the transport and supply vessels, comprising altogether nearly one hundred vessels of

all classes, set sail upon one of the most important campaigns of the war. The naval vessels, surpassing in number any fleet ever gathered before upon the Atlantic coast, presented a grand and inspiring panorama.

The principal ships were the frigate *Wabash*, carrying about sixty guns; sloops of war *Susquehanna*, *Vandalia*, *Mohican*, and *Pocahontas*; gunboats *Augusta*, *Bienville*, *Curlew*, *Florida*, *Ottawa*, *Pawnee*, *Pequin*, *Seminole*, *Forbes*, *Senaca*, *Unadilla*, and many smaller vessels and steam tugs armed with rifled cannon. As they sailed away from the coast of Virginia on that beautiful October afternoon, formed in three lines abreast, with the big flag-ship *Wabash* leading the centre column, it was indeed a magnificent and thrilling spectacle. The prows of the great ships were pointed towards the south, and, as no one at that moment, not even its commander, knew the destination of the fleet, orders being sealed, and to be opened only after the vessels were well out to sea, speculation was keen among officers and men as to where the first blow was to be struck.

Signal officers had been placed upon the flag-ship,

with brigade commanders upon the transports and upon the old ocean liner *Atlantic*, the headquarters of General Sherman, commanding the army. Constant communication was maintained by the army signals between the different commands of the army, with remarkable accuracy and dispatch, and the small body of signal officers and men had not only their knowledge of signals fully tested, but their powers of endurance as well.

Off Hatteras a terrific storm was encountered and it appeared as if many of the frail craft improvised for the occasion would be engulfed or driven on shore. Not the least of dangers to be guarded against was that of collision where so many ships were so closely gathered, and the service of the Signal Corps became of the greatest importance, in fact, was indispensable in transmitting and receiving instructions and orders, reporting casualties, etc. During two days the storm continued with unabated fury, and the ships were scattered in every direction. Signal officers and men were on duty day and night, frequently being lashed to the railing of wheel-houses or bridges, to enable them to retain any stationary

relation to the ship, and to prevent being washed into the sea.

Drenched to the skin, and nearly frozen, these men stuck to their posts like veterans, and performed their duty with flag by day and torch by night until the storm abated. Food and hot drinks, in this case unprohibited by saint or sinner, were served to them at night upon their perches, and there eaten and drunken as best they might, between the biting winds and the roaring sea of that awful storm. Ships were tossed like egg shells, and many became helpless and were taken in tow by the stauncher vessels. I remember a little river steamer commanded by as brave a man as ever walked a quarter deck, Captain Phillips by name, which seemed about to be engulfed in the raging sea as our own good steamer, the *Atlantic*, bore down to her relief, the captain in her wheel-house, perched on her upper deck, the waters making a clean breach through the vessel fore and aft as we approached and hailed, asking if he would be taken off and abandon his ship. "No, I will stand by her until she sinks, but get a line to me if you can." And so we did and saved the little craft, and later

she did good service in southern waters under this brave commander, as a dispatch boat.

Several vessels were lost in this storm, but on the morning of November 4th, the scattered fleet began to arrive off Port Royal, which, upon opening orders, was found to be its rendezvous. The steam frigate *Susquehanna* was the first to arrive, followed by the *Atlantic*. These were the only ships in sight on that morning, of that great fleet which had so proudly sailed from Hampton Roads seven days before. During the day, however, many came in and anchored. Upon the following day, the 5th, several gunboats were sent into the harbor upon a reconnoissance to discover the location of the fortifications of the enemy, and to ascertain their strength and that of the rebel fleet also. The rebels opened fire upon them as was expected, to which our ships made no reply, and soon withdrew, having gained the desired information without loss.

During all this time the greatest activity was in evidence in both arms of the service, and the Signal Corps was kept busy in transmitting orders from ship to ship and in keeping watch for the expected rebel

ram which it was reported would run down and attack us as did the *Merrimac* in Hampton Roads, the fleet lying at anchor there. However, no ram appeared, and the morning of November 7th dawned clear and beautiful. The waters of the Atlantic and of the bay of Port Royal seemed in perfect repose. A peaceful calm rested upon the face of all nature. The lofty pines and the graceful palmettos, dressed in their rich tropical foliage, seemed to rejoice together in the resonant stillness of the atmosphere. The shores of the "Sea Islands" appeared to be within rifle-shot, though miles away. Voices could be readily heard from ship to ship as the great fleet of war vessels were preparing for action. Every eye was strained to discover the first indications for getting under way. Very soon the smoke from the funnels of the steam war-ships assured us that the hour of attack was close at hand. At this moment a message was received by army signals from the flag-ship that the attack would be made at once and the *Wabash* would take the advance. The grand old hero Dupont declared that he would lay the *Wabash* within five hundred yards of the enemy's works and level them to the ground or sink his ship.

All the larger armed vessels were to follow where he led. The smaller vessels would act independently. The plan of battle was to pass into the harbor and attack Fort Beauregard on the right or north side of the harbor, proceeding past that position after delivering their broadsides, then paying their respects to the rebel gunboats lying in the upper part of the bay, describing a circle and returning towards the starting point, passing Fort Walker on Hilton Island on the south side of the bay ; then, unless the enemy in the mean time surrendered, the circle would be again traversed by every ship not disabled, and they would move in still closer to the forts.

This was the plan of the battle of Port Royal, and it was executed as calmly and with as perfect precision as if it were but a holiday event, instead of one of the most tragic and momentous occurrences of the war.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the great ships began to move. Slowly, majestically, the frigate *Wabash*, carrying more than sixty guns of heavy calibre, forged ahead and took her place in the advance. Through my field glass many of her officers

could be recognized upon her main and quarter decks. The brave old Commodore Dupont, conspicuous above all others, took his position upon the quarter deck and remained there during the entire action. Then followed the other vessels of the squadron, those carrying the heaviest and greatest number of guns taking the lead.

I had often read of naval battles and of the terrific effect of shot and shell, but until that hour had never begun to realize what fearful engines of destruction they were. Words can convey but a feeble description of the scene which opened within the next half hour and continued for nearly three hours, every ship of that great squadron in action ; every gun within the rebel forts sending forth their messengers of death ; shells bursting in mid air, in the rigging and hulls of the ships, in the waters of the bay, in the fortifications of the enemy, in the sands upon the shore, great columns of sand at times spurting up fifty feet in the air and falling back like an immense fountain of water as a shell buried itself beneath the surface and exploded, smoke and flame sometimes shutting from view for several moments the ships and

forts, but everywhere on every side, the booming of the great guns, the bursting of the death-dealing shells, until it seemed that the rebel fortifications must be razed to the ground, and that many of the ships would be crippled and sunk by the terrific bombardment. Soon it was evident that the rebel fire was weakening and becoming more irregular and infrequent, and, as the smoke lifted, it was seen that many of their guns were dismounted or otherwise disabled.

An incident thrilling in character and of more than tragic interest, occurred during this battle. It was observed that a gun upon Fort Walker was repeatedly loaded by a man wearing a red shirt. He was closely watched. Other guns were deserted or dismounted, but the gun served by him remained in position and was loaded and fired with the utmost coolness and precision, until finally his heroic bravery was recognized by the "boys in blue" upon the transports, and they began to cheer the rebel with the red shirt. Cheer upon cheer from the throats of ten thousand men rent the air each time he came upon the parapet to load his gun; finally a shot

struck the gun as the brave fellow appeared again to load it, and both the man and the gun disappeared from our view amid the smoke of the bursting shell. When we gained the fort, the red-shirted rebel was lying dead beside the gun he had served so gallantly and so faithfully. Who was he, I hear you ask. An Irishman, forced into the ranks of the rebel army at Charleston; the only Irishman I ever saw fighting under the rebel flag. His remains lie beneath the palms and palmettos upon lone Hilton Head. Above them a monument of bronze or stone should be erected to commemorate his heroic bravery. An Irishman is brave by instinct. In all my experience in battle I never saw an Irishman who showed the white feather.

Such terrific cannonading nothing human could withstand, and by one o'clock the rebel flags were lowered. Then came the rush of the army for the shore. All the small boats were ready and the men likewise, and in a few brief moments thousands were leaping from them as they touched the beach, and, plunging through the surf, gained the bluff and pushed forward after the flying rebels. Among the

latter there was a perfect stampede. Throwing away guns, knapsacks, and sabres, they fled for the woods and swamps in the greatest fright and confusion, crying: "The Yankees are coming; the Yankees are coming." The rout was chaotic, the victory complete. The rebel fleet, together with several passenger steamers which had run down from Charleston and Beaufort to see the "Yankee ships sunk" — a boast which had been made by the rebel commander previous to the battle — soon beat a hasty retreat, and ran away as fast as steam could carry them, and the dense black smoke from their funnels could be seen over the tree tops, long after the vessels had disappeared from view. It has always been a mystery to me why our gunboats did not follow up and capture or sink the rebel fleet, as it could easily have been done without the loss of a man.

Thus ended one of the most brilliant naval engagements of the war, and had the victory been followed up at once by an advance upon Savannah and Charleston, both would have fallen within the next two weeks.

During the battle the signal officers were engaged

in transmitting and receiving orders to and from the brigade commanders, and in preparations to land as soon as the enemy surrendered. They were among the first on shore and at once established a signal station upon the only plantation house in sight. This station was the first one opened south of the Potomac, and it was maintained without interruption during the entire war. A day or two later a station was opened upon the parapet of Fort Beauregard across the bay three miles ; another, three miles distant west, and not long after at Spanish Wells plantation and Braddock's Point, — the latter upon the plantation house of the noted South Carolina nullifier, John C. Calhoun, — thus establishing a line the length of the island, twelve miles, the Braddock Point station being one of observation, as it covered the mouth of the Savannah River, Tybee Island, and Fort Pulaski. The first shot fired upon Fort Pulaski by the Union Army after the commencement of the war was from a rebel water battery at Braddock's Point. This was in presence of General Hawley, General Terry, and the signal officer with them. The guns had been spiked with rat-tail files when the

enemy retreated, but the Yankee machinist was equal to the occasion, and drilled them out, and it was from these guns that the shot was fired that awoke Johnny Reb, and brought him up on the walls of the fort in large numbers to see what the Yanks were up to.

During the next four weeks the signal officers and men were kept busy in various ways; in opening communication, scouting, reconnoissance, acting as aids to the generals upon whose staffs they were serving, and supplying information to the commander of the army and navy, until it came to be generally understood that the signal officer was the repository of everything worth knowing, being both omniscient and omnipresent, and was besieged for news accordingly. He was to be prepared at any moment, night or day, to undertake the most hazardous service. He stood in confidential relation to the general commanding and enjoyed his most unlimited confidence, but he was bound by a solemn oath not to divulge the secrets of the system and code; consequently no other than a signal officer, either in the army or navy, knew or could interpret its mysterious motions.

Thirty days after the capture of Port Royal, Beaufort was occupied. This was the summer home of the blue-blooded aristocracy of South Carolina. Before we entered the town it had been looted by both negroes and rebel cavalry, and its streets were strewn with household furniture, broken crockery, books, picture frames, pianos, etc.

A new duty was imposed upon the chief signal officer — that of general inspector — in order to show the condition of the place when our army entered it. This duty was performed to the satisfaction of the commander. A line of communication was at once established by signals with Bay Point and Hilton Head. Nine days after landing at Beaufort, the chief signal officer was directed to cross Port Royal Island to the Coosaw River ten miles away, in command of two companies of the Fiftieth Pennsylvania Volunteers, to examine the opposite shore of that river; feel the enemy; draw his fire; capture him; find an advantageous place to land troops upon the main land, and return — if alive — to headquarters with his report, the same day. All this was accomplished except the capture of the enemy. In fact, in this

respect the boot came near being on the other leg, and had it not been for the opportune arrival of a small steamer with a detachmant of Third Rhode Island boys and a couple of brass field pieces on board, I doubt if this tale would have been told by me. The result of this little skirmish was that the rebels dusted, our loss two killed and about a dozen wounded. This was new work again for the signal officer, but he rose to the occasion, made his plan, submitted it to the general, accompanied him the following day down to the flag-ship eighteen miles away, where a council of war was held, and the plan of battle drawn up by the signal officer, which contemplated landing an army at the point indicated, marching south four miles, flanking the rebel position and fort at Port Royal Ferry, was adopted, and coöperation by the navy assured. Sixteen days later the battle of Port Royal Ferry took place. Troops crossed the Coosaw River in flat-boats at daylight, landed at the place selected, the signal officer accompanying the army being by accident the first upon the shore. General Isaac I. Stevens commanding was in the bow of the leading boat,

and beside him the signal officer. It was run up alongside of an overturned flat-boat, the tide having ebbed so that at the moment it was above water, the general leaped upon this improvised wharf, but its slimy surface was too elusive for the general's spurs, and down he went, while the impetus given by the sudden stop of the boat sent the signal officer flying over him and up the bluff without waiting for orders to advance. A signal officer was on board the leading gunboat, and at once communication was established between the army and navy. The enemy in small force at this point, promptly retreated inland, destroying bridges and felling trees across the road. These obstacles were speedily overcome, and within an hour our advance met the enemy and the fight was on.

This was the first opportunity to test the efficiency of the signal system under fire in actual battle. Its utility and usefulness had been demonstrated in a certain manner on many occasions, but it was yet to be seen if its officers and men were of the metal to place themselves in positions of the greatest danger, and still retain the coolness and level-headedness

which were the prime essentials for the successful execution of this duty.

As I recall my impressions at the moment just preceding the opening of the battle, I realized fully the importance of the occasion, and the responsibility resting upon myself individually as being the only signal officer with our troops on shore, and determined at all hazards to win success for this new arm of the service. With this purpose in view, I advanced with our skirmish line to the crest of the ridge beyond which the rebels were lying in the edge of the woods. Their position could not be seen from the gunboats, and for more than two hours the firing from the latter was directed by our signals. During this time the signal party, an officer and two men, was a conspicuous target for the enemy, and a continuous fire of grape, canister, and bullets was kept up upon them. None of the party were injured, but the signal flag was repeatedly shot through. The duty performed upon this occasion received due recognition from both the army and naval commanders and the signal officer was honored by the President with the brevet of major for "gallant and meritorious service."

Our troops were victorious in this engagement, and the general commanding did not hesitate to acknowledge that his success was largely due to the aid of the signal service.

From this time on, the Signal Corps in the Department of the South was considered an indispensable auxiliary to every movement of the army or navy. It took part in the campaign of Florida in March, 1862, its chief officer being the first to land at Fernandina and to raise the first flag upon the house of the rebel governor of the State in that city. Gen. Horatio G. Wright, commanding the troops, made this his headquarters upon landing the following day. Here again the work of the Signal Corps became conspicuous. From the cupola of the governor's house where a signal station had been opened within a half-hour after landing, the transport fleet could be seen outside the bar. Communication was immediately established with the signal officer on the steamship *Empire City*, who wagged a message from General Wright that the ship was aground on the bar, storm approaching, and asking the naval commander for assistance. This message was at

once delivered, and resulted in two powerful gun-boats being sent outside and the steamship hauled off from her perilous position, where, had she remained during the night, the storm which came on before morning would have destroyed her, and, doubtless, many lives. This occurrence is a matter of record at the War Department, and the saving of the steamship, cargo, and many lives, is placed to the credit of the Signal Corps.

The advance upon Charleston, known as the campaign of James Island, followed shortly after the occupation of Florida, and in this the Signal Corps became an important factor. It formed almost the only method of rapid communication between the army and navy, and between the different posts of the army. Its scouting parties and details for observation were constantly on the alert; scorning every danger, surmounting every obstacle, they became the right arm of the commanders in the field. They won their way to this enviable position by downright pluck, persistent energy, undaunted courage, and faithfulness to the discharge of their duty.

I have the right, and believe it to be my duty to

the memory of my comrades who so ably seconded my efforts, to give this testimony upon this occasion, however strongly I may be inclined to shrink from it.

At one point on James Island fully half a mile in front of our lines, a tall pine was selected as a station of observation. The perch was reached over eighty feet from the ground, by slats nailed upon the rough bark of the tree, forming a ladder. From this perch one could look into Charleston and over the bay — over Fort Johnson and the fortifications in the rear about the village of Secessionville. I climbed to this crow's nest but once. This once was enough for me. I made a solemn vow that if I ever reached mother earth alive, I would never again be guilty of such a foolhardy act.

At another time, two signal officers and an aid of General Stevens were scouting outside our lines with the purpose of ascertaining the strength and location of the enemy in our front. Advancing along the margin of a creek under cover of a fringe of trees, we dismounted and fastened our horses and crawled upon hands and knees a quarter of a mile to a grove of live oaks where we expected to obtain a good view

into the earth-works and rifle-pits of the enemy. We succeeded, but were discovered. The writer slid down from that big live oak and behind its protecting trunk in less time than it takes to tell it, and in a moment it was riddled with grapeshot and shell. When the rebels concluded we were dead or wounded, and ceased firing, to send out and bring in our remains, we made a dash for our horses that would have put in the shade a modern sprinter, mounted, and, taking to the open field, put spurs to our steeds and made for our lines with the shot, shell, and rebs hot after us, and we got there.

On the 16th of June, 1862, the battle of James Island was fought. It was intended to surprise the enemy by an attack before daylight, but as usual, our troops were delayed and it was nearly sunrise when we struck the outposts in front of Secessionville. They were prepared for us and the first fire from their pickets killed two of our men. A brigade was at once deployed and ordered to charge. The order was gallantly executed under a withering fire of grape and canister at close range. The enemy's works were captured, but they soon rallied, and,

being reinforced, drove us back with great slaughter and the loss of many taken prisoners.

In the meantime, the signal officer upon the field having given the proper range to the batteries in the rear, and to the gunboats in the creeks on our right, was ordered by General Stevens to take command of two field pieces of a Connecticut battery, its proper officer having refused to take it into action as directed, and being placed under arrest in consequence.

Stevens, when excited, was not a strict churchman, and on this occasion he spoke from the abundance of his heart in language which could not be mistaken, but hardly suitable for a social occasion like this. The point of it was, however, that Lieutenant Tafft was placed in command of that battery, "Sir, take it up to that hedge, sir"—indicating a position on our right within close range of the fortifications—"and give the rebels —— sir."

This was a new line of work for a signal officer, but with characteristic cheek, the order was obeyed to the letter. Across that field, swept by shot and shell, the flying horses plunged, the battery swung into position, and during the next hour the dose pre-

scribed by General Stevens was effectively and generously served to the enemy. When we were finally ordered to retire, the guns were drawn from the field by soldiers instead of horses, the latter having been either killed or disabled.

After our troops had fallen back a short distance and were lying down, the signal officer was sent for by the general. Upon reporting to him he was found lying between the cotton rows still enveloped in blue flame and sulphurous smoke, but this time instead of a poor artillery subaltern who was being scorched, it was the ranking general in command who was a mile away in the woods on our left, with two or three thousand fresh troops, and who had aroused General Stevens's anger by refusing to support him in making another attack. A message was to be delivered immediately to that officer begging him to move up the troops. Finding that the message could not be sent by signals on account of heavy woods intervening, the only alternative was to ride over a marsh across which a narrow causeway had been built. This causeway was enfiladed not only by the artillery, but also by the sharp-shooters of the enemy, and

the chances for the life of a man who would attempt its passage seemed slight ; but the order was imperative, the exigency of tremendous importance. Putting spurs to his faithful horse, the officer rode straight into the jaws of death down upon the narrow roadway, indifferent to everything but the accomplishment of his purpose, urging on his flying steed until his feet hardly seemed to touch the earth ; rifle-shot and bursting shell filling the air with the song of death, passed by, leaving him unscathed, and the message was delivered to the badly frightened officer who was found sitting upon his horse surrounded by his staff, a full half mile away from danger. He declined the aid demanded, and ordered General Stevens to retreat. The perilous ride was again taken, and again rider and horse escaped. The message which carried with it the stigma of defeat, when victory seemed within our grasp, was delivered, and, recognizing a soldier's duty, obedience to the orders of a superior officer, our army was withdrawn and the advance on Charleston abandoned. Had the general commanding the army on that occasion been other than a coward, Charleston would in my opinion have fallen before the sun set that day.

The Signal Corps on this occasion, wherever posted, were commended for their efficient service, their coolness and bravery under fire.

This event closed for the present the campaign against Charleston, and, not long after, the army returned to Port Royal.

These reminiscences have already been extended much too far, and the narration of the operations of the Signal Corps in the reduction of Pulaski, the attack upon Sumter by the monitors, the campaign of Morris Island and fall of Sumter, must be deferred to some future time.

I have confined my remarks upon this occasion principally to the operations of the Corps in the Department of the South for the reason that there it was tested for the first time on the field of battle, and its initial success attained ; there its great utility was first impressed upon the commanders of the army and navy, and there the writer for nearly two years had personal charge and direction of its operations. Many interesting details of its service, individual instances of gallant and heroic bravery of its officers and men, have necessarily been omitted.

